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NCDs — a Positive Psychology Approach to Coping

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If you've picked up this book and/or begun reading this chapter (which you obviously have or else you wouldn't be hearing these words in your head!) then you probably already know what a noncommunicable disease is because you either have one yourself or you know someone else who does (and you may also be helping to care for that person).

But, so as to avoid any confusion, and just to make sure that we're all 'on the same page' here, a noncommunicable disease (henceforth to be referred to as a NCD) can be defined as a medical condition that is not infectious or transmissible among people. They tend to be grouped into four main categories, including: (1) the cancers, (2) cardiovascular disease, (3) diabetes, and (4) respiratory disease.

Notably, the most common causes of these NCDs are generally referred to as 'lifestyle factors', that is, behaviours such as smoking, insufficient physical activity, and excessive drinking or poor diet.

Although these diseases collectively lead to the premature deaths of millions upon millions of people, the unfortunate reality is that our health system is set up primarily to address acute illnesses, with primarily pharmacological interventions, rather than what are often chronic illnesses that require substantial changes in (often) multiple behaviours.

Traditional approaches

The most common approach to reducing NCDs has been to focus on lessening the aforementioned risk factors associated with these diseases. Not surprisingly, much attention has been given to reducing nicotine intake, increasing physical activity and exercise, and improving nutritional intake. It is also generally recognised that if we're to achieve effective solutions to these prevalent and costly problems we will also need to take a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary approach that includes and incorporates input from sectors such as health, education, economics and even agriculture.

Notwithstanding the importance of such recommendations, advocated by none other than the highly regarded and respected World Health Organization, the intention of this chapter is to proffer something different. The alternatives recommended for consideration herein are not in any way incompatible with the more traditional approaches; rather, they should be thought of as supplementary and/or complementary. As with any health-related problem, every individual is different, so although I am confident in the potential benefits that could come from the following health and wellbeing strategies, it is important to note that different people will most likely respond and benefit differently to different tactics. So, ultimately, the goal for each and every person aiming to tackle a NCD should be to work towards the creation of an individual program that is effective for them.

An alternative approach — rationale

This chapter proffers a new and exciting approach to managing NCDs that is based on the principles of positive psychology, and at the risk of repeating myself, it should not be considered as being mutually exclusive of the more traditional approaches, which clearly have an important role to play.

Nevertheless, in addition to any and all efforts to utilise the previously described strategies for reducing common risk factors,

it's proposed that it would also be helpful to focus on maximising the use of positive and healthy behaviours.

For almost two decades now, the focus of psychology, as well as several other health disciplines, has been fundamentally changing. Whereas historically 'health care' was very much focused on remedying disease and illness, addressing deficits and dysfunctions, there is now a much greater recognition of the need to also focus on building on strengths and maximising the use of assets. Whereas in the past there was an assumption that if 'problems' were addressed and/or resolved all would be okay, it is now believed that although that might make for a good start, there is so much more we need to do in order to help people achieve real wellness to thrive and flourish.

What we also know from related research in the fields of coaching and behavioural psychology is that people tend to be far more successful when working towards 'approach goals' rather than when working away from 'avoidance goals'. That is, it tends to be far more motivating and energising to strive for something that is desirable, rather than to make an effort to stop something that is inherently undesirable.

The good news is that over the past few decades, positive psychologists (and others) have developed and tested a range of interventions, many of which have now been proven to work. By this, I mean they have been shown to enhance happiness, health and wellbeing. And it is my belief that many of these powerful, positive strategies that have been proven to enhance mood and success in many life domains could well be very useful additions to standard treatments for those facing the challenge of a NCD.

But before describing these strategies in more detail, there is just one more, very important point that needs to be made. It is not suggested in any way that these strategies will 'cure' the disease. In some instances, there is no doubt that making major changes to lifestyle behaviours will markedly reduce illness indicators and accordingly, reduce the problems associated with the NCD and even the associated risk of death. For many, however, the

goal will be rather to improve quality of life despite the disease; something that should still be considered an important and worthy goal. The premise is that targeting mediating variables such as behaviour and cognition can radically reduce the distress and disability associated with disease. If the disease itself can be altered then all well and good; but, if not, it is still very important to recognise that individuals suffering a NCD can improve the quality of their life, and very probably the length of their life, by utilising the approaches described below.

Recommended practical strategies

Before describing the strategies I have selected to include in this chapter, it is vital I make a few general, but important comments about their application. First, although they will be outlined separately, in turn, you are invited to combine them in any ways that make sense to you. In fact, as you try out any and all of these strategies, please feel free to play around with them until you find an approach and combination that works for you. Which leads in to my second point, that it is important you do try these strategies out. You might have heard it said that it's 'the thought that counts', which is all well and good, but in reality, 'actions speak louder than words'. So, although I'm happy you are reading these pages, the reading in and of itself won't make much (if any) difference to your life. What will make a difference is the doing; so, go ahead and read, take your time to consider, but as soon as you are ready, start putting the principles in to practice in your life and persevere until they are having a positive impact.

Keeping all of this in mind, let's get going!

1. Clarifying life meaning and purpose, and setting inspirational goals to generate powerful and necessary motivation

Making real and meaningful changes to behaviours and to lifestyle is not, as many readers would already know, an easy task. Coping

with health problems over the long term is challenging and difficult, to say the least. But, that being said, what we know from research into motivation and resilience is that those people who have a clearer sense of meaning and purpose — those people who are more confident about and have a more definitive answer to the question ‘Why am I doing, or why should I do what I need to do?’ — tend to fare far better.

So, as important as it is to know what to do, it is just as, if not more important, to know why you’re doing it!

In addition, what literally decades of research findings and clinical experience have found with regards to goal setting and goal achievement, is that it’s hugely beneficial to have specific and measurable goals to work towards each and every day, medium- and longer-term aspirations for inspiration and crucially, a compelling reason for engaging in behaviours that will foster a positive and fulfilling life.

So, let’s look a bit more closely at how to achieve this.

Let’s begin to generate the material that will contribute to helping you determine your ‘why’. To start with, try to define, as clearly as possible, what your ideal life would look like (but be realistic too, so it may well be living a great life with or despite a chronic illness). If you were able to cope with and/or manage your illness, and function well regardless, what would you be doing? Where and when would you be doing it? With whom would you be spending your time?

The point here is to have a compelling vision you can keep in mind during good, and even more so, during tough times. Doing what you will probably need to do (for example, exercising and practising coping strategies on a regular basis) should never be considered as the end goal; rather, these are just the means to an end, with the end being a thriving and flourishing life, your best possible life given your circumstances. Staying focused on this ‘end’ is similar to regularly reminding yourself of the ‘why’ and will, you’ll find, be powerfully inspiring and motivating.

But, as important as this is, the power of a positive vision can sometimes wane because it can, by definition, be something that's a long way off. Which is why we now need to take these long-term goals and break them down into shorter-term, smaller bite-sized chunks that will be achievable in a more conceivable time frame.

Ultimately, it's ideal to ensure all of your goals are 'SMART', which is a tried and tested acronym for:

S — specific (make sure your goals are as clear and well defined as possible);

M — measurable (what doesn't get measured doesn't get done! So, wherever possible track your progress toward your goals);

A — achievable (it's important to aim high, but not so high that you set yourself up for failure and disappointment);

R — relevant (your goals need to be important for you; not someone else);

T — timed (wherever and whenever possible, set a specific start and finish date).

So, with this in mind, reflect now on your positive vision of the future and then ask yourself the following questions:

- If I'm going to be where I want to be in five to ten years, where do I need to be in 12 months' time?
- And if that's where I need to be in 12 months' time, what do I need to do over the next three to six months?
- And if that's where I want to be in three months' time, what do I need to work on and achieve over the next four weeks?
 - What do I need to do each week, for the next four weeks?
 - What do I need to do each and every day this week?
 - And finally, what will my very first step be?

Now, it's important to recognise that progress is rarely smooth; so there will inevitably be ups and downs as you work towards your

goals. But, if you can stay focused on specific and small steps each and every day and each and every week, you will definitely make progress; and importantly, if you track and monitor your progress you will know very quickly if you are heading off track. If and when you do stumble or fall, just reassure yourself that it's normal and then do whatever you need to do as soon as you can to get back on track as quickly as possible.

2. Creating positive lifestyle behaviours such as exercising, meditation and healthy eating to ensure the availability of requisite energy levels

I've said and written this many, many times over the years but although it might appear ridiculously simple, it is (I believe) so important that it bears repeating — it's hard to be happy if you are, quite literally, sick and tired.

Now I know that many people reading this will feel, by definition, sick and tired but those descriptors are, to some extent, relative. By this, I mean that wherever we are starting from, we can always become fitter and healthier.

Even if you're not aiming to become wellness warriors or marathon runners, you can still work towards fostering, developing and maintaining healthy lifestyle behaviours that will enhance your sense of wellbeing and notably, create more energy with which you can enjoy life and cope with difficulties. And even if you're not looking to become a marathon running vegan (not that there's anything wrong with marathon-running vegans), you can work towards healthy behaviours and a wellness lifestyle that's appropriate for you.

Keeping this in mind, I list below a number of suggestions for your consideration (noting, of course, that everyone is different and everyone will have different goals and different needs):

- Find a form of exercise that you can enjoy more days than not. Ideally, aim for five to six sessions of relatively intense exercise (albeit, something that's relevant to you and achiev-

able despite your condition). And note the word ‘enjoy’; if you can make exercising fun it becomes so much easier to do it consistently (which is key).

- In addition to formal exercise (for example, running or going to the gym) it is also very important to just keep as active as possible as often as possible. Too much sitting is arguably one of the most common contributors to health problems, and inactivity is increasingly being referred to as ‘the new smoking’. So, even if you have a chronic condition that makes moving difficult — in fact, especially if you have a chronic condition that impacts on your mobility (it’s even more important then) — do the best you can do move as much as you can as often as you can.
- Respect your body by only putting healthy ‘fuel’ into it. I’m not a dietician or nutritionist so I can’t and won’t offer specific advice here, but what I am more than happy to recommend is a diet that predominately includes ‘real foods’. Quite simply, that means eating as much unprocessed food as possible (which in reality means limiting what you eat out of packages!). In addition to mostly eating ‘real food’, two more simple rules to follow are ensuring that most of what you eat is plant based (as many vegetables as possible) and that you don’t eat too much (even if your diet is healthy, over eating is still not a good thing).
- Ensure you get adequate sleep. By some estimates, up to 80% of adults get an hour’s less sleep each night than they really need. That’s millions of people who are trying to function and cope with life while deprived of one of our most important needs — sleep. And lack of sleep leads to more than just tiredness and irritability; in addition, it has been associated with a range of health problems that more than likely would exacerbate or at least make it much harder to cope well with NCDs.

So, make sleep a priority, get into a good sleep routine, and address any and all stress and worries.

- As well as sleep, it is also important to have plenty of rest, and one of the best ways to rest your body and your mind is through applied relaxation (or meditation) strategies. There is no doubt that people who meditate regularly have been found to be happier and healthier; and an added bonus is that these strategies also help with sleep and with managing stress.

Each of these healthy lifestyle behaviours brings with it powerful benefits, but what they also do is make it harder to engage in unhealthy behaviours! For every minute or hour or day you're engaging in positive behaviours, that's an hour or a day you're NOT engaging in bad habits or practices that will detract from your health and wellbeing.

3. Developing an optimistic mindset to ensure positive emotions and resilience

Despite being one of the most important skills for living a good life and for coping with a difficult life, optimism is also (unfortunately) one of the most misunderstood constructs and strategies within psychology with many people incorrectly equating it with 'positive thinking'.

Although real optimism does undoubtedly include elements of positive thinking, it is also (and crucially) fundamentally grounded in reality. What's important to note is that real optimism acknowledges that it's vital to balance a focus on the positives with a determination to face up to the cold hard realities.

Because of these and other related misunderstandings, many discount optimism as an ineffective 'Pollyanna' or 'rose-coloured glasses' approach that either won't work at all or will ultimately lead to disappointment and frustration.

But again, if applied appropriately, realistic optimism has been shown to be one of the most important and helpful strategies we

can use in any context because among other things, it is correlated with higher levels of health, happiness, success and longevity. In short, optimistic thinking provides substantial benefits for those who want to enjoy more of the good times and cope better with the tough times.

Now, some people are lucky enough to be born with a natural predisposition to optimism; but for those who weren't (and there are many of us who weren't), the good news is that we can learn to be more optimistic. Just like we can learn other life skills, we can learn to think more optimistically and, as a result, we can enjoy more resilience, grit and mental toughness.

How? Well here are some tried and tested strategies that with dedication and work will indubitably help:

- Keep things in perspective: It's easy at times, and especially during difficult times (when we're in pain or distressed) to 'make mountains out of molehills'. In fact, this is so common, psychologists have a name for this specific type of unhelpful reaction: it's called 'catastrophising', and we all do it! But the fact it's common does not mean it's useful, so next time you're upset, try to catch yourself and ask 'Is it really that bad?' (which is not to say the cause of your distress is fantastic or desirable, but sometimes we can turn 3 or 4 out of 10 into 9 or 10 out of 10!)
- Stay focused on solutions: Even if or when you are facing real challenges, getting bogged down in the problem and negativity tends not to help. In contrast, those who cope better tend to acknowledge the reality of the situation but then as quickly as possible, move on to focus on solutions, on what they can do about the situation. Try it next time and see if it doesn't make you feel more hopeful, confident and in control!
- Fostering gratitude: Another simple but powerful strategy is to remind yourself, even or especially during difficult times, of

what's going well. Just because you're experiencing problems in one area of your life doesn't mean all the other areas are completely negative. What we know is that if people can recognise and focus more on the good, then the bad seems more manageable and less distressing. So, try to count your blessings and be grateful for whatever you can.

- **Practising acceptance:** The reality is that the audience for whom I'm writing this chapter don't, by definition, have perfect health. Further, the existence of a NCD will almost certainly have an impact on other areas of life (including functioning and mood, for example). It would be absurd to shy away from this; in fact, it would be unhelpful because denying the existence of some reality is likely only to lead to other forms of distress. Accordingly, I recommend you consider the active practice of acceptance. This doesn't mean you have to 'like' your condition or be grateful for the fact you have a disease, but it does mean that if you have it you are almost certainly better off acknowledging it. Because once we accept and acknowledge something we can then take positive action. And that's what this section is about, taking positive action. So, view acceptance not as a form of passive resignation, but rather as a necessary and positive precursor to doing whatever you can do to manage what ever you have and then move forward to build the best life possible.

4. Connecting with others and building a support team such that positive reinforcement and encouragement are regular occurrences

Life can be hard enough sometimes; it's even harder if or when we feel like we're all on our own. Research clearly suggests that one of the greatest contributors to health and wellbeing, to happiness and success, is 'other people'.

Feeling like we belong, feeling connected, having at least a few people to whom we feel close ... these are vital factors to

living and enjoying a good life. And, not all that surprisingly, the number and quality of our relationships also comes into play when we are going through difficult times and/or facing tough challenges. Resilience, for example, is not just about being strong and coping on one's own; it is also about having the ability to reach out and ask for help from those you know will want to give help.

In my PhD research, in which I investigated factors associated with coping with chronic pain, I found, among other things, that the nature and quality of support from a 'significant other' (usually, but not always, a spouse or intimate partner) markedly impacted on the extent to which the pain was perceived to be distressing and/or disabling. Another way of saying this is that having the right person in your life helping in the right sort of way can drastically reduce the negative impact of chronic pain (and other illnesses) and simultaneously increase the positive quality of life, despite ongoing problems.

So, what should those with a chronic illness or a NCD be trying to do, and what should they be asking and encouraging their supporters to do? Well, here are some evidence-based strategies I invite you to try...

- First, don't be afraid to ask for help. Some people are concerned that it might be seen as a sign of weakness, but this couldn't be further from the truth and it's distinctly unhelpful. 'Strong' people are often 'strong' because they do ask for help and they allow others to help when they offer.
- Explain to others, as clearly as you can, exactly what you want and need, and how and when you need it. Too often people assume others will just know what to do, but the reality is – they don't. So, outline what they can do to help, simply and clearly, and ideally keep things as closely as possible in line with the following proven approaches ...
- In short, those who cope the best have partners who are supportive and encouraging, but who don't necessarily do

everything for their partner/loved one. That is, they help the person in need to do what they need to do but they don't always do it all for them (because this can foster dependence and reliance and ultimately can increase disability and a sense of hopelessness).

- Obviously, everyone is different, so be prepared to communicate as effectively as you can, repeat yourself and persist where necessary, and negotiate until you all arrive at a mutually convenient and useful outcome.
- Finally, be prepared to do all you can, but also be open to accepting help. This is easier said than done sometimes, but it's also the most helpful and useful approach for all involved.

5. Identifying and utilising core strengths to generate flow and peak performance

One of the most exciting aspects within the still relatively new and exciting field of Positive Psychology is the focus on making the most of core strengths, rather than just trying to fix apparent weaknesses. Too often our 'health system' operates as a 'sickness system', meaning that attention is pretty much exclusively on what's going wrong to the exclusion of what's going right.

Clearly, when someone has a NCD, something is 'going wrong'; but that rarely (if ever) means that everything is wrong and it certainly doesn't preclude the notion that the person experiencing the NCD almost certainly has a number of strengths, innate talents and attributes, that if utilised appropriately and effectively could well reduce the negative impacts the disease has on the person's life.

Although there is little research specifically investigating the use of strengths to cope with NCDs or chronic illnesses, there is a rapidly growing body of research in other areas that clearly concludes the application of strengths is associated with better mood and better functioning. It's almost impossible to imagine,

then, why the same wouldn't be relevant here. That is, although the use of strengths won't ever cure or eliminate disease, it will almost certainly help individuals cope with and function better despite ongoing disease.

So, how then can you take advantage of this?

First, in order to maximally and beneficially use our strengths we must be aware of them; and many of us aren't aware of them! So, start off by completing a free Strengths Survey at the VIA Institute on Character (<https://www.viacharacter.org/www>). It will only take you 20 minutes and the potential 'return on investment' could be life changing.

Start actively looking for ways to utilise your strengths to cope better and to live better. The easiest place to start is with your 'top' strengths (those closer to the top of the list in the report you will receive after completing the aforementioned survey); but then look to use any and all of them, where and when relevant.

You can find a useful (and free) tip sheet on The Happiness Institute's website (<http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com> — in the 'Resources' and then 'Free Products' section titled 'The Happiness Institute's Guide to Utilising Your Strengths').

And finally, you will almost certainly also find it helpful to talk to your family and friends and anyone who is supporting you about what they think your strengths are and how you could better use them, as well as what their strengths are and how you could benefit from their application also.

In short, although there will be 'problems' and faults and weaknesses and deficits you will inevitably need to address, don't ignore your strengths and attributes, those positive qualities you possess that if and when leveraged, could well bring about better coping and a better quality of life.

Summary

In conclusion, I trust you have found this chapter helpful and I hope it has helped you consider NCDs (either yours or that of a

loved one) in a new light. By definition, NCDs will be associated with health problems, and in the same way, they are not something we would ever perceive ‘positively’.

At the same time, however, NCDs (just like any other challenge or problem) can be approached in ways that are more helpful and constructive and, accordingly, the impact any illness or disease has on an individual’s life can be mitigated and minimised.

Rather than focusing exclusively on ‘what not to do’, this chapter proposes that it’s well worth focusing just as much, if not more, on ‘what TO DO’. It is argued that such a strategy would provide more motivation and inspiration and, therefore, increase the chances of success. The science of positive psychology has produced many strategies that have been proven to work in similar areas over the last decade or so, and there’s no reason they shouldn’t be useful for those wanting to avoid and/or better cope with NCDs.